

THE FOURTEEN-MINUTE GAP

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Rex Bradford

During Watergate, one of the more important events was the discovery of an "eighteen minute gap" on one of the Nixon tapes. This erasure, reportedly performed by Presidential secretary Rose Mary Woods on Nixon's orders, created quite a stir when revealed. It was never determined what in fact had been erased, which added to the mystery of the affair.

This article presents my discovery of a second such tape erasure, this one of a phone conversation conducted between President Johnson and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover less than 24 hours after the assassination of President Kennedy. The erasure in this case is about 14 minutes in length, somewhat shorter than the Nixon gap. The Johnson tape is different in one other significant respect—a transcript of the conversation survived the erasure. It is in my view the true "smoking gun" tape of modern American history.

First, some background. At last November's JFK Lancer conference in Dallas, former military intelligence officer and history professor John Newman gave an electrifying presentation. In this talk, he discussed in detail the existence, *post-assassination*, of the famous "Oswald" Mexico City tapes. One of the most astonishing documents to surface in this regard was a transcript of a phone call between FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and the new President Lyndon Johnson. This call occurred at 10:01 AM on the morning of November 23, 1963, less than 24 hours after the assassination, while Oswald was still alive in a jail cell in Dallas. The most explosive portion of this transcript is reproduced below:

LBJ: Have you established any more about the visit to the Soviet embassy in Mexico in September?

Hoover: No, that's one angle that's very confusing, for this reason—we have up here the tape and the photograph of the man who was at the Soviet embassy, using Oswald's name. That picture and the tape do not correspond to this man's voice, nor to his appearance. In other words, it appears that there is a second person who was at the Soviet embassy down there.¹

Tapes of Oswald calling the Soviets not matching his voice? But hasn't the CIA declared since the beginning that these tapes were routinely recycled prior to the assassination, leaving only transcripts as evidence on November 22, 1963? When the above LBJ-Hoover conversation was first revealed a few years ago, many assumed that Hoover was being typically loose with his facts. But last November, Newman presented a good deal of evidence which corroborates Hoover's astounding statement that the taped calls did indeed survive the assassination and were listened to by FBI agents. Some of this comes from the Lopez Report, the long-suppressed House Select Committee on Assassinations staff report on Oswald's trip to Mexico City. More still comes from newly released FBI materials, some only available for the first time last year. The Lopez Report excerpted a memorandum from FBI's Belmont to Tolson on 11/23/63, which states:

... Inasmuch as the Dallas Agents who listened to the tape of the conversation allegedly of Oswald from the Cuban Embassy to the Russian Embassy in Mexico and examined the photographs of the visitor to the Embassy in Mexico and were of the opinion that neither the tape nor the photograph pertained to Oswald, ...²

Also in the Lopez Report is the following excerpt of a memo from Hoover to Secret Service Chief Rowley on 11/23:

....The Central Intelligence Agency advised that on October 1, 1963, an extremely sensitive source had reported that an individual identified himself as Lee Oswald, who contacted the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City inquiring as to any messages. Special Agents of this Bureau, who have conversed with Oswald in Dallas, Texas, have observed photographs of the individual referred to above and have listened to his voice. These Special Agents are of the opinion that the above-referred-to-individual was not Lee Harvey Oswald....³

The "extremely sensitive source" above is a wiretap, and this quite detailed interagency memo should by itself be sufficient to corroborate the LBJ-Hoover call. But there is more. There are CIA documents from the day of the assassination referring to the review of "intercepts" and "actual tapes."⁴ There is also an 11/25 FBI cable which refer to tapes "previously reviewed Dallas."⁵ Newman presented yet additional documents, including an FBI memo from January 1964. At the bottom of this memo from Brennan to Sullivan discussing CIA-FBI liaison procedures, Hoover scrawled his own comments: "OK, but I hope you are not being taken in. I can't forget the CIA withholding the French espionage activities in USA nor the false story re Oswald's trip to Mexico City, only to mention two of their instances of double-dealing."⁶ There may be more to come. An 11/23 FBI memo, from agent Eldon Rudd to Dallas Special Agent-In-Charge Gordon Shanklin, has an interesting redaction: "With regard to the tapes ***** referred to herein, CIA has advised that these tapes have been erased and are not available for review."⁷

From the new cables and memos, it appears likely that the tapes were put on a special plane to Dallas on the evening of the 22nd, arriving at Love Field at 2:57 AM local time on the morning of the 23rd.⁸ There, unspecified agents listened to them and concluded that the voice on the tapes did not match that of the captured Lee Oswald, who was presumably sitting right in front of them. But later that day, a CIA cable mysteriously asserted that *one* of the tapes had been routinely erased prior to the assassination.⁹ By the following day, the official story held that *all* tapes had been recycled prior to the assassination.¹⁰ As noted, however, there is now enough official traffic in the record concerning the

tapes' existence that there is every reason to believe that these later cables in fact represent the beginning of a cover-up.

What was on these "Oswald" tapes that was so important? In one of the conversations, the caller identifies himself as "Lee Oswald" and then refers to a previous meeting with a man named Kostikov. Valeriy Kostikov was a known KGB agent working under diplomatic cover in the Soviet Embassy. More ominously was that, through an informant in an operation code-named TUMBBLEWEED,¹¹ he was identified as a member of the KGB's "Department 13," which concerned itself with sabotage and assassinations. The import of the Mexico City phone calls, placing Oswald in a meeting with a KGB assassination officer, was explosive enough. The knowledge that Oswald was impersonated in these calls, eight weeks prior to the assassination, had to have been even more stunning news. Less than 36 hours after the voice on the tapes was determined to be other than Oswald's, Lee Harvey Oswald was dead.

With this background, it is time to tell of my discovery. I had

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spent the day before the Lancer conference at the LBJ Library in Austin, and purchased some 17 tapes of LBJ phone calls, a few of them assassination-related. But not included among these was the incredible LBJ-Hoover call of the 23rd, which Newman showed in transcript form. After busying myself with other matters, finally around the first of March of this year (2000) I called the LBJ Library to inquire about whether a tape of this phone call was available. I spoke with library staff member Regina Greenwell, who informed me that yes they did have it, but it was of such poor quality as to be inaudible. Having been impressed by the quite *good* quality of the other tapes in my possession, and given the import of the conversation, I half-jokingly asked if this was another "18-minute gap." Ms. Greenwell agreed that this seemed a bit troubling, but then went on to say that LBJ had yet to move into the White House and was still using his Vice-Presidential taping system. This "magnetic belt" system was of inferior quality—the library had needed to enlist technical help to enhance the signal quality of the conversations on these belts before releasing them. Curious, I asked to purchase the cassette tape which contained the Hoover conversation of the 23rd. I hung up with the impression that *all* conversations on this tape would be inaudible.

Several days later the single cassette tape arrived. Imagine my surprise when the first few calls, taped on the evening of the 22nd, sounded perfectly clear (they may indeed be of somewhat lesser quality than the later Dictabelts, but not by much). Then came, according to the printed call log on the cassette label, the 10:01 AM Hoover call. At this point, the tape emits over 14 minutes of silence interrupted only by some kind of "pop" or "beat" about every seven seconds (presumably at the seam where the end of the belt meets the beginning, though that is just a guess). The

succeeding conversation, which is denoted as beginning at 10:17 AM, sounds perfectly clear again.

The log for side A of this compilation cassette tape is printed below, and only the Hoover call is silent.

11/22/63	9:06 PM	<u>Arthur Goldberg</u>
11/22/63	?	(Machine Noise)
11/22/63	9:10 PM	Richard Maguire
→ 11/23/63	10:01 AM	<u>J. Edgar Hoover</u>
11/23/63	10:17 AM	<u>George Meany</u>
11/23/63	1:10 PM	Carl Albert
11/23/63	1:15 PM	Fred Kappel
11/23/63	1:35 PM	Edwin Weisl, Sr.
11/23/63	1:44 PM	<u>Ralph Yarborough</u>
11/23/63	1:50 PM	Everett Dirksen
11/23/63	1:55 PM	Robert Anderson
11/23/63	2:00 PM	Mrs. J. D. Tippitt

Underlined names denote the beginning of a new magnetic belt. Note that the Hoover conversation occupies its own belt. There is thus the possibility that a blank belt has been substituted for the original. Expert testing could presumably distinguish between this and erasure of the real belt. In any case, the effect and inferred motivation remain the same.

Johnson's daily diary, available at the LBJ Library web site, notes the Hoover call, which occurred after briefings from National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and CIA Director McCone. According to the diary, the call from Hoover was followed by a brief call from Bundy (untaped) and a call to labor leader George Meany (in the second column, 'f' signifies "from", 't' signifies "to"). The next three hours are taken up in these activities: a brief photography session, a viewing of the body of President Kennedy in the East Room of the White House, a meeting with former President Eisenhower, a discussion with CIA Director McCone, another discussion with President Eisenhower, and a call to Senator Humphrey (untaped). See the portion of the log reproduced below¹²:

11/22/63	9:06 PM	Arthur Goldberg
11/22/63	?	(Machine Noise)
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Page from White House Log

I called the LBJ Library on March 17 and spoke with Regina Greenwell again, to see what else I could learn. The Vice-Presidential recording system in place at the time of these recordings used an IBM machine which recorded magnetically on wide loop-

ing belts. This is a different system from the "Dictabelt" system used by President Kennedy and later by President Johnson. The LBJ Library had to borrow a machine from IBM in order to transfer the tapes to cassette. The original belt holding this (now mute) conversation is in existence and was used as the source for the



transfer. It now resides in the National Archives II in College Park, Maryland; my call to that facility elicited little interest. The LBJ Library seems aware of the anomaly of this single

conversation being "silent," but as far as I have been told no one has taken steps to perform an analysis to determine: 1) what exactly may have happened to this belt, or 2) whether any voices can be "pulled" electronically off the original by signal filtering, boosting, etc. The conversation was presumably transcribed contemporaneously, though it does not appear that anyone knows for certain who transcribed this particular conversation or when.

I am not an audio engineer, but clearly people who are should be called in to examine this belt. In the 1970's, the firm Bolt, Beranek and Newman was hired to determine the nature of the 18-minute gap in the Nixon tapes, and they were able to determine the means by which a portion of the tape in question had been erased. There may not be any way of learning when or by whom erasure was applied in this case. But it would also be of great importance (if possible) to be able to prove that a conversation, however faint, existed underneath the hiss.

And I do mean to suggest that this astounding conversation, recorded less than 24 hours after the murder of President Kennedy, has been subjected to purposeful erasure (or alternatively, substitution by a blank belt). The belt should be submitted to independent scientific testing to see what may be learned. In the meantime, common sense will suffice. One can be glad at least that somehow the transcript was missed by whoever erased the belt. Crimes and cover-ups are rarely perfect.

The discovery of this erasure adds one more brick to the already impressive evidence of the tapes' post-assassination existence. What are the counter-arguments to this thesis? Primarily, the argument has been simply that the CIA denies it and the FBI has seemed to agree. Typical of this is the 11/25 cable noting "There appears to be some confusion in that no tapes were taken to Dallas but only written transcripts."¹³ One would be advised to keep in mind Senator Richard Russell's comment to former CIA Director and fellow Commissioner Allen Dulles: "I think you've got more faith in them [CIA] than I do. I think they'll doctor

anything they hand to us."¹⁴

The argument that Hoover was loose with the facts is perhaps arguable with respect to the phone call, but can hardly explain his detailed and specific memo to the head of the Secret Service. The other internal FBI memos also belie the idea that Hoover was making this up. As to the conflicting but substantial evidence that Oswald was indeed in Mexico City visiting embassies, this proves nothing. What better way to establish the authenticity of the intercepts than by piggy-backing them onto an actual trip made by the real Oswald (to get a visa), with witnesses to verify his presence.

Not yet heard is a "bozo agent" argument. Could the FBI agents have been mistaken in their finding that the voice wasn't Oswald's, perhaps aided in their confusion by the "mystery man" photograph that clearly wasn't him? It seems obvious that the FBI would have given all benefit of doubt to the proposition that it *was* Oswald on tape, and only been dissuaded by necessity. I would like to turn now from the argument over the tapes' existence to the profound effect they had in the early aftermath of the assassination. Within 24 hours of President Kennedy's death, the highest levels of government had received the following information:

1. Lee Harvey Oswald was the apparent assassin of President Kennedy (the rifle was traced to an A. Hidell by the early morning of the 23rd¹⁵).
2. Someone identifying himself as Lee Oswald had visited the Cuban and Soviet embassies in Mexico City in late September and early October of 1963, and (the same?) Lee Oswald made phone calls to the Soviet embassy. This Oswald connected himself to Valeriy Kostikov¹⁶, a known assassination-implicated KGB officer. Oswald had also seemed to imply that he had a relationship with the Cubans ("I went to the Cuban embassy to ask them for my address, because they have it."¹⁷). *one*
3. Tapes of intercepted phone calls, which appear to have been flown from Mexico City to Dallas on the evening of the 22nd, were listened to by FBI agents who had conversed with Oswald. These agents determined that the voice on the tape was not that of the Oswald who sat in a Dallas jail cell.¹⁸ *hvt se*

The following actions are known to have occurred in the face of this amazing situation confronting the government:

1. Two hours after the LBJ-Hoover call, the CIA Mexico City station cabled headquarters announcing that one of the tapes (the earlier 9/28 call) had been previously erased ("Station unable to compare voice as first tape erased prior receipt of second call.")¹⁹ [Since FBI memos earlier in the day²⁰ specifically referred to the tape of this call from the Cuban to the Soviet Embassy, was this a trial balloon for a one-erased-tape cover-up strategy?]
2. In the early afternoon on the 23rd, CIA Headquarters cabled the Mexico City station, asking "Are original tapes available?"²¹ [*If they did in fact exist* and had been listened to, can this cable have been anything other than a big hint that a new story about the tapes' existence (or lack thereof) was desired?]

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3. By early afternoon on Sunday the 24th, within two hours of Oswald's murder at the hand of Jack Ruby, CIA Mexico City station reported to Headquarters that "Regret complete recheck shows tapes for this period already erased."²² The CIA has stuck by this story since that day.
4. But apparently the decision to go with this story, that the tapes were routinely recycled prior to the assassination, was made earlier. The previous evening, before Oswald's murder, FBI agent Rudd reported to Gordon Shanklin that "CIA has advised that these tapes have been erased and are not available for review."²³
5. Monday, November 25, saw continuing discussion of the tapes amidst discussion of their erasure. Perhaps the participants were uncareful or not fully on board the new story. A cable from Washington DC to Legat, Mexico City at 7:15 PM noted "Include tapes previously reviewed Dallas if they were returned to you." The reply noted "There appears to be some confusion in that no tapes were taken to Dallas but only typewritten transcripts..." Finally, by the evening of November 25, mention of the tapes being listened to ceases.²⁴
6. On the same day, November 25, Assistant Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach issued his famous memo to Presidential assistant Bill Moyers. In it, Katzenbach asserted that "The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial."²⁵ [When questioned in 1999 about his knowledge of the FBI listening to tapes in Dallas, Katzenbach is reported to have denied knowing anything about this, but added: "Whether I knew anything about it at the time, or what I knew about it at the time, I don't recall."²⁶]
7. Over the next few days, Lyndon Johnson arm-wrestled men like Earl Warren and Richard Russell onto his blue-ribbon Commission, using the threat of nuclear war. LBJ told Senator Richard Russell "And we've got to take this out of the arena where they're testifying that Krushchev and Castro did this and did that and kicking us into a war that can kill forty million Americans in an hour."²⁷ [But since the tie-in of Oswald to the Soviets and Cubans was created by an impersonator, the obvious conclusion would be that no such connection really existed, only the purposefully planted *appearance* of one. Why the need to go to World War III with the Soviets if they weren't involved?]

What does the saga of the Mexico City tapes tell us about the assassination and the cover-up? The application of this new knowledge to the search for JFK's killers is a complex topic on which I

will not speculate here.²⁸ But light has also been shed on the cover-up which occurred in the wake of this lightning storm of events. The Warren Commission's ostensibly encyclopedic 26 volumes of published evidence are completely silent on the issue of Oswald transcripts or tapes.²⁹ The Warren Commission's unpublished-but-numbered body of evidence (Warren Commission Documents) includes a great deal of information about Oswald's entry to and exit from Mexico, but is similarly silent on transcripts and tapes.

Exactly how much Allen Dulles or other Commissioners may

have learned informally will probably never be known, but it is clearly more than they put into these records. For instance, we know that President Johnson bragged to Richard Russell that he (LBJ) had recruited Earl

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Warren where Bobby Kennedy failed because he "pulled out what Hoover told me about a little incident in Mexico City."³⁰ Also of interest is a memo of January 31, 1964, from the CIA's Richard Helms to Commission Counsel J. Lee Rankin, declassified in 1992.³¹ This lengthy memo contains much detail about Kostikov, including his association with Department Thirteen, "responsible for executive action, including sabotage and assassination." But there is no mention of tapes or transcripts, and the Warren Commission was apparently troubled about sources. A March 26 memo from the Commission to the CIA complained that previous responses did not contain complete answers, particularly "what was the information and how was it obtained."³²

The Warren Commission apparently prevailed soon thereafter. Recently, former Assassination Records Review Board Counsel T. Jeremy Gunn reported that two Warren Commission staffers, William T. Coleman Jr. and W. David Slawson, told the board that in 1964 they had gone to Mexico City and not only read transcripts, but listened to recordings.³³ But what is unknown is whether Warren or any of the other Commissioners were let in on the secret that the voice was not that of the dead Lee Harvey Oswald. Warren and the others may indeed have conducted a cover-up in order to avoid what they believed to be true leads pointing toward Soviet and Cuban complicity in the assassination, for the good of the country as they saw it.

One may debate the morality and wisdom of such a decision. But it is clear that the same motives cannot be ascribed to Lyndon Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, and any other high-level officials who knew the truth—that the Oswald-Soviet/Cuban connection was in fact a plant. The possibility exists that some of these men were complicit in the assassination and used an incomplete version of the Mexico City story to force a cover-up. However, it is also true that any public investigation into this affair would have inevitably aired a good deal of CIA operations and dirty laundry, not to mention leaving the country with sophisticated and unknown murderers of the President at large. Faced with this alternative, Johnson and Hoover and others may have decided their only real choice was to try to force the books shut on the whole affair.

Finally, some speculation. It seems only common sense that the original assassination plot did not call for Oswald to be ar-

rested and later shot dead in a police station on national television. Something apparently went awry. So suppose Oswald had instead wound up conveniently dead in the Book Depository or on the streets of Dallas, the assassin of the President gunned down while eluding capture. Who then would have determined that the voice on these tapes was not his?

Is it possible that such a plan was really meant to kick off a war that some powerful men of that era believed was inevitable and even desirable? Or, as Peter Dale Scott has suggested, was such a frightening prospect designed to force the government to press a lone-nut version of events? And what of Gilberto Alvarado Ugarte, the Nicaraguan undercover agent who appeared on November 26, offering a story of having seen Oswald accept money in the Cuban Embassy to kill Kennedy? Was his appearance a quick improvisation to fill a role that the tapes, now consigned to oblivion in the wake of Oswald's capture and interrogation, were supposed to fulfill?

The Mexico City story, dragged bit by bit out of government files over the years, has turned more incredible and more deeply troubling at every turn. It has shed significant light on the behavior of the FBI and the Warren Commission, and provides tantalizing leads in the curious pre-assassination handling of the knowledge of the "Oswald" calls. Now comes the latest twist—the erasure of the one phone call known to have discussed the Oswald impersonation. One wonders how much of this story is yet to be revealed.

Notes

1 November 23 10:01 AM LBJ-Hoover call. The transcript is available from the LBJ Library. Also excerpted in *Taking Charge*, Michael R. Beschloss ed., Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 23. The transcript is also excerpted in the Lopez Report, Addendum to Footnote #614 (NARA RIF #180-10110-10484).

2 Lopez Report, Addendum to Footnote 614.

3 Ibid.

4 A CIA memo of 11/22 notes that an "intercept" was discovered, which Newman says would refer to a tape and not a transcript. Newman showed another CIA MEXI cable of 11/22, which notes review of "actual" tapes. I do not have the references for these.

5 Cable of 11/25 from Legat, Mexico to Washington DC.

6 See *Oswald, the CIA and Mexico City: Fingerprints of Conspiracy*, Probe Magazine, September-October 1999.

7 NARA RIF #124-10230-10430. Eldon Rudd is the agent who flew to Dallas on the evening of 11/22 with photographs, and perhaps tapes as well. There may be yet more evidence in the files. There is a pre-assassination FBI memo in Oswald's Mexico City file by a C. B. Peck, marked as noting oral receipt of information from an informant whose identity is redacted, which is completely blacked out to this day (NARA RIF #124-10230-10426).

8 A memo from FBI SA Heitman to Special-Agent-in-Charge, Dallas on 11/22 advises that "Eldon Rudd is proceeding to Dallas in the Naval Attache plane." The memo specifically mentions photos but not tapes (NARA RIF #124-10027-10345). This may be due to the highly secretive nature of the CIA surveillance operation. A previously redacted portion of the same memo describes the photos as "deep snow stuff."

9 CIA MEXI 7023 of 11/23 asserts "Station unable to compare

voice as first tape erased prior receipt of second call."

10 CIA MEXI 7054 of 11/24 reports "Regret complete recheck shows tapes for this period already erased" (NARA RIF #104-10015-10082).

11 Newman presented information on the TUMBLEWEED operation in his talk, including a memo from the CIA's Thomas Karamessines which made the Department 13 connection. I do not have references for these documents.

12 The URL for this particular page of entries is www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/diary/1963/631123.asp.

13 Cable of 11/25 from Legat, Mexico City to Director, FBI (NARA RIF #124-10158-10029).

14 Warren Commission Executive Session transcript of 12/16/63, p. 39.

15 Warren Report, p.16

16 Memo from DD/P to Director FBI, 11/23/63, CIA document #102-574. See also FBI memo of 10/18/63, relaying this information prior to the assassination (NARA RIF #124-10230-10419).

17 CIA Doc #102-574.

18 LBJ-Hoover 11/23 10:01 AM call, Hoover-Rowley 11/23 memo. Shanklin-Belmont 11/23 memo, Belmont-Tolson 11/23 memo.

19 CIA MEXI 7023 of 11/23.

20 Memo of 11/23 from Belmont to Tolson.

21 CIA DIR 84886 of 11/23.

22 CIA MEXI 7054 of 11/24.

23 FBI memo from Rudd to Shanklin of 11/23 (NARA RIF #124-10230-10430).

24 Another 11/25 straggler appears to be a memo from CIA DD/P to the FBI, discussing the same voice appearing on the calls.

25 Memo from Katenbach to Moyers of 11/25, attached to Belmont to Evans memo of the same day (NARA RIF #124-10085-10080).

26 Associated Press story by Deb Riechmann, November 21, 1999.

27 November 29 8:55 PM call. The tape is available from the LBJ Library.

28 See John Newman's *Oswald, the CIA and Mexico City: Fingerprints of Conspiracy*, Probe Magazine, September-October 1999 for some interesting information in this regard. He expanded on these ideas in his November talk.

29 There is a reference to Kostikov in one exhibit in the 26th volume, in a memo from CIA DD/P Richard Helms to Commission Counsel Rankin. This memo makes the connection between Kostikov and the "Kostin" of Oswald's November 9 letter to the Soviet Embassy in Washington. No mention of tapes or transcripts is included here (CE 2764).

30 November 29 8:55 PM call. The tape is available from the LBJ Library.

31 CIA Doc #509-803.

32 HSCA JFK Exhibit F-514.

33 Associated Press story by Deb Riechmann, November 21, 1999. Coleman and Slawson have also told this story to Peter Dale Scott (*Deep Politics II*, 2nd edition, JFK Lancer, 1996, p. 12) and Anthony Summers (*Not in Your Lifetime*, Marlowe & Co., 1998, p. 277). The question of whether the voice was Oswald's apparently never entered their minds. Summers also spoke on background with the CIA officer who played them the tapes.